

Folk and Minor Art in India
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Lecture - 36
Cultural Condition: Colonial and Postcolonial Bengal – Part I

So, for the context of the new module where we have going to talk about the Cultural Condition during a Colonial and Postcolonial era in the context of India. We are going to focus on a few major factors that came with the modernization of the civilization and culture which included printing and painting as parallel traditions and there had been other conditions that operated the main stream folk art practice in the country. So, it was stated earlier that the folk art practices specially the narrative scrolls and other similar kind of art works that was meant for social purposes which was done for keeping certain aim in mind and those aims were primarily to reach out to the common mass telling the stories, sometimes using images as an alternative of texts for the people who are not that highly literate. So, it is also said in many different texts of that time that there had been people whom we cannot totally call uneducated though they were literate.

Literacy level was low, but through the folk art and culture, basically through the proliferation of different textual messages through the narrative paintings, the narrative auditions, folk songs, folk performances people got the hang of the literature, the model training and many other things that was required for their basic education. So, it was almost like a medium of reaching out to the common people and encourages them to operate their thinking for the entire society. So, there had been some common value that prevailed in the common community culture.

So, that was something which went on for a very long time, but then even after the introduction of printing and mass production when the society got familiar with the printed texts and those had some multiple additions to it and even after that the folk art practice went on for a very long time, but it was slowly losing its basic purpose. So, it is also something that is a little more complex to understand that when it loses its primary purpose then it lives for a secondary purpose and here the secondary purpose to art term is much more glorified than the primary purpose that is, the folk art then survived for pure aesthetics and even now when we look at the contemporary phase of Indian folk art,

we feel that it is a purely surviving for it is aesthetic value and the kind of message it gives us that has found alternative sources.

But still, the folk art practices going on because of the rich identity because of the rich compositional value the narrative qualities and the visual aesthetic that is understood and well taken by a huge mass and also the practitioners are taking a different interest towards it and they are instrumental when carrying out the tradition through changes and they are flexible enough to adopt changes and they are also traditional enough to stick to the conventional norms learning the basic knowledge and there are also people who are the patrons, who are the collectors and preserver and they are instrumental in the knowledge preservation parts.

So, that is the basic profile of Indian folk art in a very positive perspective and there are other things also that we will discuss in the last module that which are the factors causing certain changes into the entire practice and some changes are for good and some changes are not doing much good to the practice then things are slightly complex and to understand that and to be able to assess and make judgmental comments on all those happenings which is very contemporary, one has to take a sub line view and because of that it is very important that we should also have some understanding of the parallel tradition or the parallel visual culture that was on during the pre and postcolonial era in our countries context.

To understand the context, we have taking the zone which is in the eastern India that is the Bengal that was the undivided Bengal in the pre and postcolonial era and we are making a study to understand that although printing was introduced in the Western India much before it came to Bengal, but ,with the new technology with the technological empowerment, it came for new aesthetic and it was more like the gift of printing that brought changes into the social life of the Eastern Indian culture to a large extent and many of those things are very well documented and there are clues. So, we are using Bengal as our focus and we are trying to understand how the social favor changed with new technologies and new medium of expression onwards. So, it is more like we are going to talk about the cultural condition in the colonial and postcolonial era which is focused on the postcolonial ideologies.

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Cultural Condition: Colonial and Post colonial Ideologies

During the formative years of urbanization in Bengal the living was locality based.

The social formation adhered to the doctrines of *Manusamhita*, *Brahmabaibartapurana*, *Maitripanishada* and similar ancient texts.

The instructions of which brought people of similar profession together as working communities.

This is evident from the name of the localities that still exist,

- *Beniatola* (business-class-locality)
- *Patuatola* (painters-locality)
- *Kumortuli* (potters-locality)
- *Dorjipara* (tailors-locality)

Social formation in pre-independent Bengal

During the formative years of urbanization in Bengal, the living was locality based and the social formation adhered to the doctrines of Manusamhita, Brahmabaibartapurana, Maitripanishada and similar ancient texts. The instructions of which brought people of similar profession together as working communities and this is evident from the name of the localities that still exists and it is Beniatola that means, the locality where the business class people dwell, a Patuatola, the community where the painter communities live and that is a locality based classification then we have names like Kumortuli, the potters-locality and Dorjipara, the tailors locality and so on.

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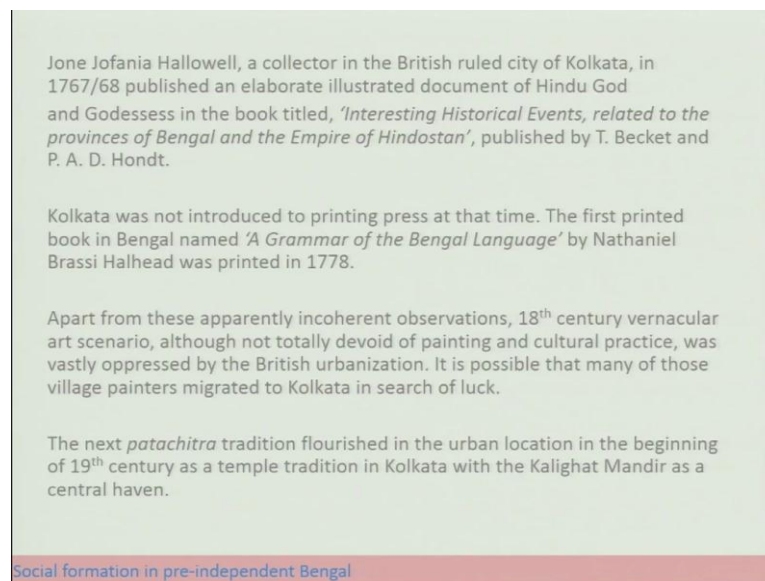
There were Portuguese, Dutch and French intruders before the British who concentrated mainly on trade, but the British aimed to establish their colony as well as their culture.

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Jone Jofania Hallowell, a collector in British ruled city of Kolkata in 1767 or 68 published an elaborate illustrated document of Hindu God and Goddess in the book titled interesting historical events related to the provinces of Bengal and the empire of Hindostan published by T Becket and P A D Hondt. Kolkata was not introduced to printing press at that time. The first printed book in Bengal named A grammar of the Bengal language by Nathaniel Brassi Halhead was printed in 1778. Apart from these apparently coherent observations, 18th century vernacular art scenario, although not totally devoid of painting and cultural practices was vastly oppressed by the British urbanization and it is possible that many of those village painters migrated to Kolkata in search of luck and the next patachitra tradition flourished in the urban location in the beginning of 19th century as a temple tradition in Kolkata with the Kalighat Mandir as a central haven.

So, when the urban patachitra tradition sheltered in Kolkata, the entire art panorama was directed towards a new sensibility that was introspective of the means of time and it came up with the new profile that was more urban than rural. So, we are getting a parallel tradition of the rural folk art practice and like what was centered in Kolkata as Kolkata turned into a city and there are people who came from villages who got into the new sensibility with the time and it was also like based on the time and the kind of change the time was bringing in through then new sensibilities.

So, K G Subramanyan expresses that the present cultural scene is obsessed with the sense of time that gives it a semantic location and they reinterpret history and set a sorted synonymous of times such as colonial, postcolonial, modern, postmodern these are the term that came into the vogue. So, I quote from K G Subramanyam written in 2007 that sense most of them talk in terms of hand drawn dichotomies and history is no more to them a placid stream of growth and continuity, but a turbid channel of conflict and that takes us to the complexity of the time that it was no longer a smooth happening, but there are external sources, the conscious practices that operated the entire making of the history and it was slowly getting much conscious and the images were getting much more eclectic and the influences were very thoroughly absorbed to the common sensibility that made it all the more interesting in the present context.

The tradition of Kalighat urban patachitra is no longer existing, it died due to the turmoil of time but the kind of aesthetics that the culture had to offer to the common mass are still very significant because the kind of images that they produced had a strong British influence into it and that made it very different from the earlier traditions. In spite of the fact that the entire images had the essence of the rural folk art of India and the subject matters are also chosen from a pure Indian sensibility and they are often religious because it was part of the temple tradition the pilgrims used to collect all those images as part of their temple visit. So, they were more like the souvenirs as they started and slowly it worked as the source of entertainment for the common mass where they incorporated the secular subjects that often was emphasized in the social scandals and many other popular stories that was there. So, the history is always palpable in the preview of its visual culture, the change in color of time lives impression and stimulates the vital identity of the period of the time.

The guiding factors here are the aesthetic sensibilities which is also largely dependent on the pragmatic methods in the semiotic level, available material and technological progressions. Another important factor that is also the communication outreach, an advancement of which causes a shrink to bring the isolated closer and expand the outlook with easy interaction and alter life style to overcome standardized conditions. So, every day we were encountering a new sensibility and it grew very fast with that.

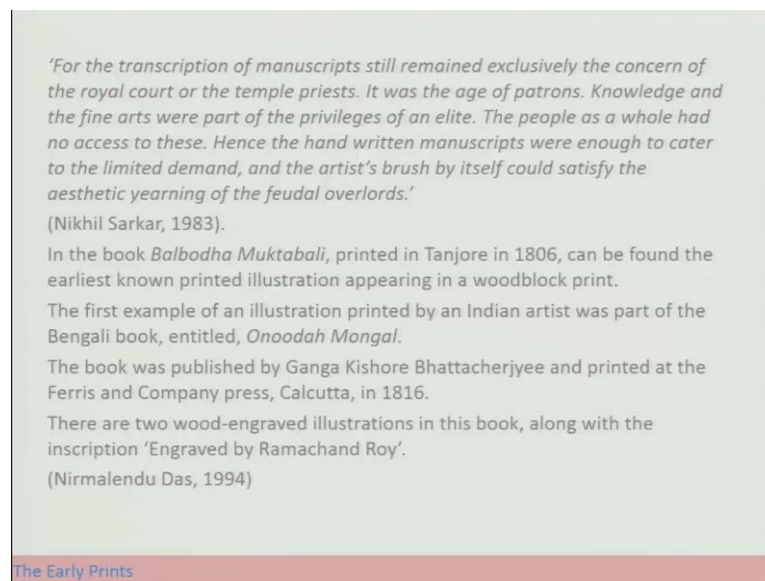
After the independence, it was a time for free thinking. So, the new experience of being independent, the newly achieved freedom and the fledgling nation was in terms with many other cultural conflicts that was brought by the eclectic characteristic of culture that was all ready there that took place into like for a very long time. So, the new experience brought in every Indian mind, a keenness to get the test and feel of an indigenous aesthetics. The popular culture responded to nationalistic movement and hereafter to the technical empowerment and then it evolved with time. The images flat, a blend of folk and urban flamboyances which was well established as a path to reach the common mind and to accept their own brands and identities.

It came up with the profile which was eclectic and at the same time Indian. The Indian manufactured products were long recognized for their palpable, packaging and their graphic qualities in them even before independence and they often stand out for their loud imageries which are very strong and bold such as religious heads, deities, famous persona, the political leaders, flora, fauna and almost everything that was included into it. They were brightly colored and commonly contrasted with bold and obvious contour lines and the style was a mixture of traditional eclectic popular and often cash representation of imageries if we take it in a present term, Indian visual culture considering such environment may be looked at as a passage to the age old culture of our country.

The hand printed and hand painted imageries that emerged during the colonial rule and then obtained its phase lift during the post independent era shows how the popular images made at the cultural taste of a particular time of a particular space and the need of mass production en steered a change in the existing tradition that was accountable for a new aesthetics and apart from the improved functionality because the need of the time was more and the people of that time were slowly drawn into consumer societies and their consumption was directed towards a very new sensibility that was brought in

through the newly achieved independence. The new aesthetic perpetually thrived it is blatant identity with a lasting impact to our mind and between the mid 16th century and the end of the 18th century, printing activities were already invoked in different parts of our country, but it only flourished after the new system of education covered the middle class majority and the backward or less fortunate, less privileged mass of the society and that way it got its phase lift in true sense.

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So, let me quote from Nikhil Sarkar in 1983, he writes for the transcription of manuscripts still remained exclusively the concern of the royal court or the temple priests. It was the age of patrons. Knowledge and the fine arts were part of the privileges of elite and the people as a whole had no access to this and hence the hand written manuscripts were enough to cater to the limited demand and the artists brush by itself could satisfy the aesthetic yearning of the feudal overlords. In the book *Balbodha Muktabali*, printed in Tanjore in 1806, can be found the earliest known printed illustration appearing in the woodblock print. The first example of an illustration printed by an Indian artist was part of the Bengali book entitled *Onoodah Mongal*. The book was published by Ganga Kishore Bhattacharjyee and printed at the Ferris and Company press, Calcutta, in 1816. There are two wood-engraved illustrations in this book along with the inscription Engraved by Ramachand Roy quoted from Nirmalendu Das, 1994.

So, although the printing started in western India as we know with the Gutenbergs bible printed in Goa, the first printing press was set there and mainly two prints biblical text which we got introduced to printing and it was necessary for the Christian Missionaries to print things in numbers and to spread the knowledge of Christianity to the common people of this country. Handwritten things were not enough and they needed everybody to get accessed to that and through them literacy was also spreading throughout and the literacy rate was going very high.

So, the biblical text had to be readable and it was translated in many vernacular languages of that time and got printed in mass quantity, it also came with illustrations and there were mainly in graving and it also was naturally embedded with the European aesthetic sensibilities. So, people were getting introduced to the story of the biblical texts and the morals which were not very different from the one that they enjoyed in the local stories. It was an interaction that was taking place, but the style of illustration built up a lot of other sensibilities to them and that was connected to the unambiguous formation and the realism which is closed to the naturalistic tendencies and all those things got added to the common visual culture of that particular time.

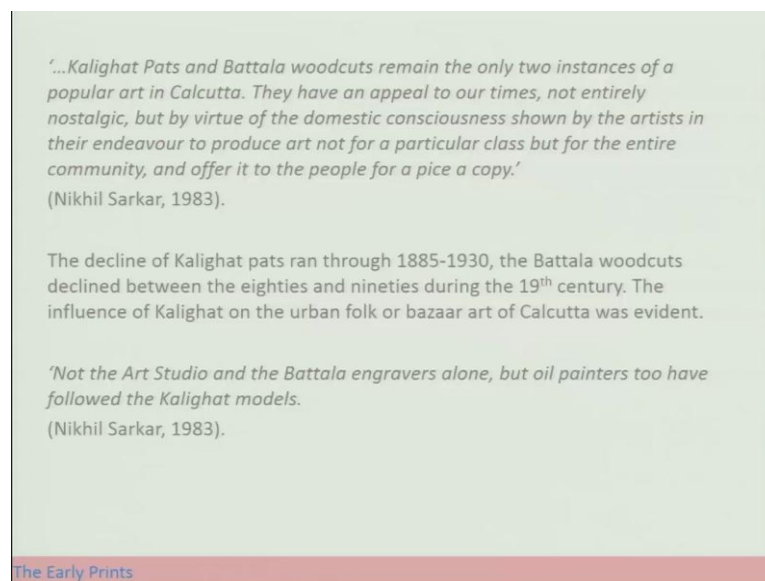
During 1830s, printing places were established in Shobha bazaar, Dorjitola, Aharitola, Goddenghata, Shimuliaya and Bagbazar in Northern Kolkata or North Calcutta of that time. The popular urban traditional pat painting of Kalighat came upon the fresher of increasing demand of lowering the cost of their work because the mechanized printing and the handmade printing was not very well understood and appreciated by the common mass. When they were walking on the wooden engraving and other things that was compared with the visual qualities of the mechanized printing and the cost was going lower and lower which also caused a significant change into the aesthetic quality of the urban folk painting and it was more like a deterioration that was taking place because of the lowering of the cost, they came up with quick solution and they were coming up with quick imageries and they no longer worked on it with same effort, but they got drawn into mass production instead.

So, the popular urban traditional pat printing of Kalighat came upon the pressure of mass production during 1860 to 1870s, an analogous practice known as Batthala in Shobha bazaar and Chitpur areas of Kolkata became the heart of Indian printing activities and Batthala printing is always like it is often compared with the grab literature of England

where grab is not a prestigious word and in that sense it was more like the literature which is for the places which are very inferior. So, Battala literature also did not enjoy the high literature quality, it was a mostly done for the regular entertainment and there had been popular stories with low literature value, but it is still a subject of our research now because it had a particular characteristic into it which was very consistent and that is also reflective of the common visual culture and the literary culture of that time.

So, the printing and publication industry that flourished and thrived in this area came to be known as a country's most important publication centers until the end of 19th century, Battala spread like anything and there had been no other examples which was there in that time and that was as popular as this and the amount of printing that was taking place and there had been new stories, new illustrations almost every day and it spread amongst common people like wild fire.

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Kalighat pats and Battala woodcuts remain the only two instances of a popular art in Calcutta. They have an appeal to our times, not entirely nostalgic, but by virtue of the domestic consciousness shown by the artists in their endeavor to produce art not for a particular class but for the entire community and offer it to the people for a pice a copy written by Nikhil Sarkar in 1983. The decline of Kalighat pats ran through 1885- 1930, the Battala woodcuts declined between the eighties and nineties during the 19th century. The influence of Kalighat on the urban folk or bazaar art of Calcutta was evident. Not the

Art studio and the Battala engravers alone, but oil painters too have followed the Kalighat models written by Nikhil Sarkar in 1983. In the following lecture, we are going to focus on another aspect that is the artist block makers and the new hybrid aesthetics. In the last few lectures of this module, I am going to show you the images to understand that and right now our focus is on the historical timeline to put them together and understand it.

So, that is perhaps the reason if I am not diverting you with the images, they are very strong and one needs more time to look at them from a critical and analytical perspective. So, we are keeping it at the end of it, right now let us see it from its thematic and iconic value and later we are going to see them and understand their identity in terms of their style and aesthetics.